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*See page opposite inside of last cover.*



**Modern Classics.**

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THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.  
THE CATHEDRAL.  
FAVORITE POEMS.

BY  
JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

*ILLUSTRATED.*



BOSTON:  
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THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.



0025E





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**PRELUDE TO PART FIRST.**











## PRELUDE.



VER his keys the musing organist,  
Beginning doubtfully and far away,  
First lets his fingers wander as they list,  
And builds a bridge from Dreamland  
for his lay :  
Then, as the touch of his loved instrument  
Gives hope and fervor, nearer draws his  
theme,

## 14 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

First guessed by faint auroral flushes sent  
Along the wavering vista of his dream.

---

Not only around our infancy  
Doth heaven with all its splendors lie ;  
Daily, with souls that cringe and plot,  
We Sinais climb and know it not.  
Over our manhood bend the skies ;  
Against our fallen and traitor lives  
The great winds utter prophecies ;  
With our faint hearts the mountain  
strives ;  
Its arms outstretched, the druid wood

Waits with its benedicite ;  
And to our age's drowsy blood  
Still shouts the inspiring sea.

Earth gets its price for what Earth gives us ;  
The beggar is taxed for a corner to  
die in,  
The priest hath his fee who comes and  
shrives us,  
We bargain for the graves we lie in ;  
At the Devil's booth are all things sold,  
Each ounce of dross costs its ounce of  
gold ;



16 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

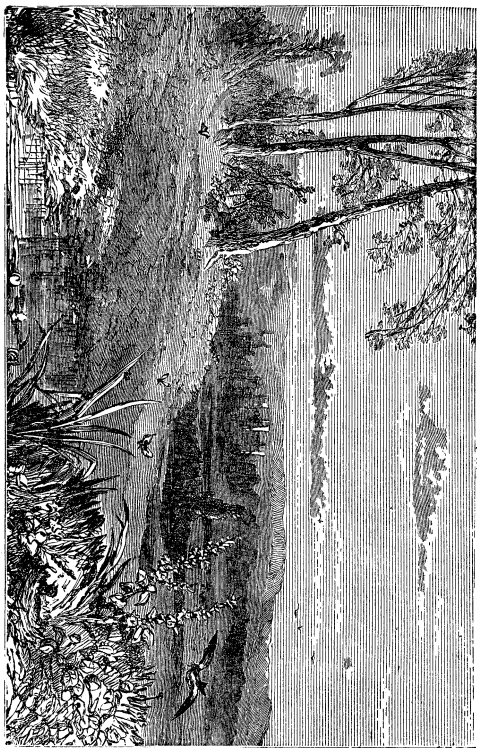
For a cap and bells our lives we pay,  
Bubbles we earn with a whole soul's  
tasking :

'T is heaven alone that is given away,  
'T is only God may be had for the  
asking ;

No price is set on the lavish summer,  
June may be had by the poorest comer.

And what is so rare as a day in June ?

Then, if ever, come perfect days ;  
Then Heaven tries the earth if it be in  
tune,





THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL. 19

And over it softly her warm ear lays :  
Whether we look, or whether we listen,  
We hear life murmur, or see it glisten ;  
Every clod feels a stir of might,  
An instinct within it that reaches and  
towers,  
And, groping blindly above it for light,  
Climbs to a soul in grass and flowers ;  
The flush of life may well be seen  
Thrilling back over hills and valleys ;  
The cowslip startles in meadows green,  
The buttercup catches the sun in its  
chalice,

And there's never a leaf nor a blade too mean

To be some happy creature's palace ;

The little bird sits at his door in the sun,

Atilt like a blossom among the leaves,

And lets his illumined being o'errun

With the deluge of summer it receives ;

His mate feels the eggs beneath her wings,

And the heart in her dumb breast flut-

ters and sings ;

He sings to the wide world, and she to

her nest, —

In the nice ear of Nature which song is

the best ?

Now is the high-tide of the year,

And whatever of life hath ebbd away  
Comes flooding back with a ripply cheer,

Into every bare inlet and creek and bay ;  
Now the heart is so full that a drop  
overfills it,

We are happy now because God wills it ;  
No matter how barren the past may have  
been,

'Tis enough for us now that the leaves  
are green ;

We sit in the warm shade and feel right  
well

22 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

How the sap creeps up and the blossoms  
swell ;

We may shut our eyes, but we cannot  
help knowing

That skies are clear and grass is growing ;

The breeze comes whispering in our ear,

That dandelions are blossoming near,

That maize has sprouted, that streams  
are flowing,

That the river is bluer than the sky,

That the robin is plastering his house  
hard by ;

And if the breeze kept the good news back,

For other couriers we should not lack ;

We could guess it all by yon heifer's

lowing, —

And hark ! how clear bold chanticleer,

Warmed with the new wine of the year,

Tells all in his lusty crowing !

Joy comes, grief goes, we know not how ;

Everything is happy now,

Everything is upward striving ;

'T is as easy now for the heart to be true

As for grass to be green or skies to be

blue, —



24 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

'T is the natural way of living :

Who knows whither the clouds have fled ?

In the unscarred heaven they leave no  
wake ;

And the eyes forget the tears they have shed.

The heart forgets its sorrow and ache ;

The soul partakes the season's youth,

And the sulphurous rifts of passion and  
woe

Lie deep 'neath a silence pure and smooth,

Like burnt-out craters healed with snow.

What wonder if Sir Launfal now

Remembered the keeping of his vow ?



THE VISION  
OF  
**Sir Launfal.**

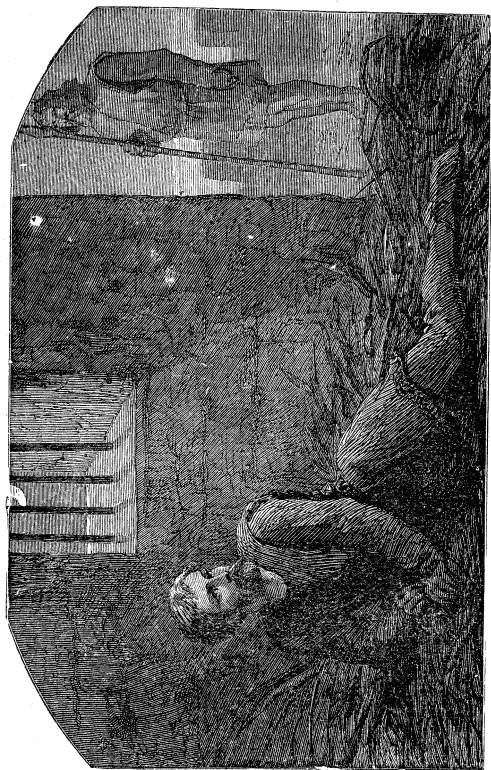


PART FIRST.











## PART FIRST.



### I.



Y golden spurs now bring to me,  
And bring to me my richest mail,  
For to-morrow I go over land and sea  
In search of the Holy Grail ;  
Shall never a bed for me be spread,  
Nor shall a pillow be under my head,  
Till I begin my vow to keep ;

30 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

Here on the rushes will I sleep,  
And perchance there may come a vision  
true

Ere day create the world anew."

Slowly Sir Launfal's eyes grew dim,  
Slumber fell like a cloud on him,  
And into his soul the vision flew.

II.

The crows flapped over by twos and threes,  
In the pool drowsed the cattle up to their  
knees,

The little birds sang as if it were

THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL. 31

The one day of summer in all the  
year,

And the very leaves seemed to sing on the  
trees :

The castle alone in the landscape lay  
Like an outpost of winter, dull and gray :  
'T was the proudest hall in the North  
Countree,

And never its gates might opened be,  
Save to lord or lady of high degree ;  
Summer besieged it on every side,  
But the churlish stone her assaults defied ;  
She could not scale the chilly wall,



32 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

Though round it for leagues her pavilions  
tall

Stretched left and right,

Over the hills and out of sight ;

Green and broad was every tent,

And out of each a murmur went

Till the breeze fell off at night.

III.

The drawbridge dropped with a surly  
clang,

And through the dark arch a charger sprang,

Bearing Sir Launfal, the maiden knight,

In his gilded mail, that flamed so bright  
It seemed the dark castle had gathered all  
Those shafts the fierce sun had shot over  
its wall

In his siege of three hundred summers  
long,  
And, binding them all in one blazing sheaf,  
Had cast them forth : so, young and  
strong,

And lightsome as a locust-leaf,  
Sir Launfal flashed forth in his unscarred  
mail,

To seek in all climes for the Holy Grail.

34 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

IV.

It was morning on hill and stream and tree,  
And morning in the young knight's  
heart;

Only the castle moodily  
Rebuffed the gifts of the sunshine free,  
And gloomed by itself apart;  
The season brimmed all other things up  
Full as the rain fills the pitcher-plant's cup.

V.

As Sir Launfal made morn through the  
darksome gate,

He was 'ware of a leper, crouched by the  
same,  
Who begged with his hand and moaned as  
he sate ;  
And a loathing over Sir Launfal came ;  
The sunshine went out of his soul with a  
thrill,  
The flesh 'neath his armor 'gan shrink  
and crawl,  
And midway its leap his heart stood still  
Like a frozen waterfall ;  
For this man, so foul and bent of stature,  
Rasped harshly against his dainty nature,

36 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

And seemed the one blot on the summer  
morn, —

So he tossed him a piece of gold in scorn.

VI.

The leper raised not the gold from the dust:

“Better to me the poor man’s crust,

Better the blessing of the poor,

Though I turn me empty from his door;

That is no true alms which the hand can  
hold;

He gives nothing but worthless gold

Who gives from a sense of duty;

But he who gives a slender mite,  
And gives to that which is out of sight,  
That thread of the all-sustaining Beauty  
Which runs through all and doth all  
unite, —  
The hand cannot clasp the whole of his  
alms,  
The heart outstretches its eager palms,  
For a god goes with it and makes it store  
To the soul that was starving in darkness  
before.”







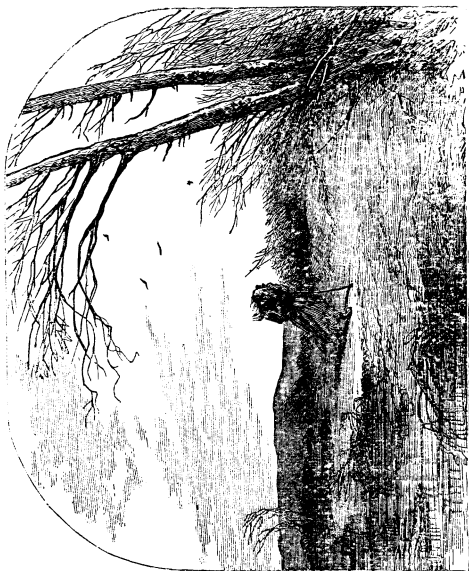
PRELUDE TO PART SECOND.













## PRELUDE.

---



OWN swept the chill wind from the  
mountain peak,

From the snow five thousand summers  
old ;

On open wold and hill-top bleak

It had gathered all the cold,

And whirled it like sleet on the wanderer's  
cheek ;

44 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

It carried a shiver everywhere  
From the unleafed boughs and pastures  
bare ;

The little brook heard it and built a roof  
'Neath which he could house him, winter-  
proof ;

All night by the white stars' frosty gleams  
He groined his arches and matched his  
beams ;

Slender and clear were his crystal spars  
As the lashes of light that trim the stars :  
He sculptured every summer delight  
In his halls and chambers out of sight ;

Sometimes his tinkling waters slipt  
Down through a frost-leaved forest-crypt,  
Long, sparkling aisles of steel-stemmed  
trees

Bending to counterfeit a breeze ;  
Sometimes the roof no fretwork knew  
But silvery mosses that downward grew ;  
Sometimes it was carved in sharp relief  
With quaint arabesques of ice-fern leaf ;  
Sometimes it was simply smooth and clear  
For the gladness of heaven to shine through,  
and here

He had caught the nodding bulrush-tops

46 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

And hung them thickly with diamond drops,  
Which crystallised the beams of moon and  
sun,

And made a star of every one :

No mortal builder's most rare device

Could match this winter-palace of ice ;

'T was as if every image that mirrored lay

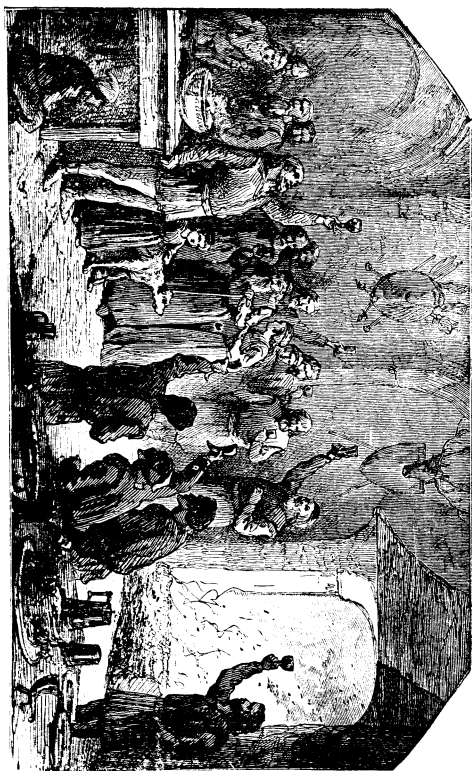
In his depths serene through the summer  
day,

Each fleeting shadow of earth and sky,

Lest the happy model should be lost,

Had been mimicked in fairy masonry

By the elfin builders of the frost.







Within the hall are song and laughter,  
The cheeks of Christmas glow red and  
jolly,  
And sprouting is every corbel and rafter  
With lightsome green of ivy and  
holly ;  
Through the deep gulf of the chimney wide  
Wallows the Yule-log's roaring tide ;  
The broad flame-pennons droop and flap  
And belly and tug as a flag in the wind ;  
Like a locust shrills the imprisoned sap,  
Hunted to death in its galleries blind ;  
And swift little troops of silent sparks,

50 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

Now pausing, now scattering away as in  
fear,

Go threading the soot-forest's tangled darks  
Like herds of startled deer.

But the wind without was eager and sharp,  
Of Sir Launfal's gray hair it makes a harp  
And rattles and wrings  
The icy strings,  
Singing, in dreary monotone,  
A Christmas carol of its own,  
Whose burden still, as he might guess,  
Was "Shelterless, shelterless, shelterless!"

THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL. 51

The voice of the seneschal flared like a  
torch

As he shouted the wanderer away from the  
porch,

And he sat in the gateway and saw all night

The great hall-fire, so cheery and bold,

Through the window-slits of the castle  
old,

Build out its piers of ruddy light

Against the drift of the cold.







THE VISION  
OF  
**Sir Launfal.**



PART SECOND.







## PART SECOND.



### I.

**T**HERE was never a leaf on bush  
or tree,

The bare boughs rattled shudderingly ;  
The river was dumb and could not speak,  
For the **weaver** **Winter** its shroud had  
spun ;

A single crow on the tree-top bleak



56 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

From his shining feathers shed off the  
cold sun ;  
Again it was morning, but shrunk and cold,  
As if her veins were sapless and old,  
And she rose up decrepitley  
For a last dim look at earth and sea.

II.

Sir Launfal turned from his own hard gate,  
For another heir in his earldom sate ;  
An old, bent man, worn out and frail,  
He came back from seeking the Holy Grail ;  
Little he recked of his earldom's loss,





No more on his surcoat was blazoned the  
cross,

But deep in his soul the sign he wore,  
The badge of the suffering and the poor.

III.

Sir Launfal's raiment thin and spare  
Was idle mail 'gainst the barbed air,  
For it was just at the Christmas time ;  
So he mused, as he sat, of a sunnier clime,  
And sought for shelter from cold and snow  
In the light and warmth of long-ago ;  
He sees the snake-like caravan crawl

60 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

O'er the edge of the desert, black and small,  
Then nearer and nearer, till, one by one,  
He can count the camels in the sun,  
As over the red-hot sands they pass  
To where, in its slender necklace of grass,  
The little spring laughed and leapt in the  
    shade,  
And with its own self like an infant played,  
And waved its signal of palms.

IV.

“For Christ's sweet sake, I beg an alms”;—  
The happy camels may reach the spring,

THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL. 61

But Sir Launfal sees naught save the grew-

some thing,

The leper, lank as the rain-blanced bone,

That cowers beside him, a thing as lone

And white as the ice-isles of Northern seas

In the desolate horror of his disease.

v.

And Sir Launfal said, " I behold in thee

An image of Him who died on the tree ;

Thou also hast had thy crown of thorns, —

Thou also hast had the world's buffets and

and scorns, —

62 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

And to thy life were not denied  
The wounds in the hands and feet and  
side :

Mild Mary's Son, acknowledge me ;  
Behold, through him, I give to thee ! ”

VI.

Then the soul of the leper stood up in his  
eyes

And looked at Sir Launfal, and straight-  
way he

Remembered in what a haughtier guise  
He had flung an alms to leprosie,

When he girt his young life up in gilded  
mail

And set forth in search of the Holy Grail.

The heart within him was ashes and  
dust ;

He parted in twain his single crust,

He broke the ice on the streamlet's brink,

And gave the leper to eat and drink,

'T was a mouldy crust of coarse brown  
bread,

'T was water out of a wooden bowl, —

Yet with fine wheaten bread was the leper  
fed,



64 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

And 't was red wine he drank with his  
thirsty soul.

VII.

As Sir Launfal mused with a downcast face,  
A light shone round about the place ;  
The leper no longer crouched at his side,  
But stood before him glorified,  
Shining and tall and fair and straight  
As the pillar that stood by the Beautiful  
Gate, —  
Himself the Gate whereby men can  
Enter the temple of God in Man.





VIII.

His words were shed softer than leaves from  
the pine,  
And they fell on Sir Launfal as snows on  
the brine,  
That mingle their softness and quiet in  
one  
With the shaggy unrest they float down  
upon ;  
And the voice that was calmer than silence  
said,  
“ Lo, it is I, be not afraid !

In many climes, without avail,  
Thou hast spent thy life for the Holy Grail;  
Behold, it is here, — this cup which thou  
Didst fill at the streamlet for me but now;  
This crust is my body broken for thee,  
This water His blood that died on the tree;  
The Holy Supper is kept, indeed,  
In whatso we share with another's need;  
Not **what** we give, but what we share,  
For the gift without the giver is bare;  
Who **gives** himself with his alms feeds  
three, —  
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and me.”

IX.

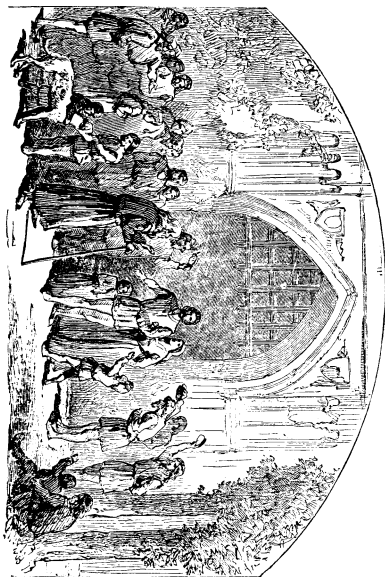
Sir Launfal awoke as from a swoond :  
“ The Grail in my castle here is found !  
Hang my idle armor up on the wall,  
Let it be the spider’s banquet-hall ;  
He must be fenced with stronger mail  
Who would seek and find the Holy Grail.”

X.

The castle-gate stands open now,  
And the wanderer is welcome to the  
hall

70 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

As the hangbird is to the elm-tree bough ;  
No longer scowl the turrets tall,  
The Summer's long siege at last is o'er ;  
When the first poor outcast went in at the  
door,  
She entered with him in disguise,  
And mastered the fortress by surprise ;  
There is no spot she loves so well on  
ground,  
She lingers and smiles there the whole year  
round ;  
The meanest serf on Sir Launfal's land  
Has hall and bower at his command ;







And there's no poor man in the North

Countree

But is lord of the earldom as much as he.



## 78 THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL.

the seventeenth book of the Romance of King Arthur. Tennyson has made Sir Galahad the subject of one of the most exquisite of his poems.

The plot (if I may give that name to anything so slight) of the foregoing poem is my own, and, to serve its purposes, I have enlarged the circle of competition in search of the miraculous cup in such a manner as to include, not only other persons than the heroes of the Round Table, but also a period of time subsequent to the date of King Arthur's reign.

